

CQ, March 6, 2009

Congress has reversed course on a policy involving a small amount of money that nonetheless proved to be a major irritant in U.S. relations with an important ally in the Middle East.

The fiscal 2009 omnibus spending bill (HR 1105) would provide \$1.3 billion in military financing for Egypt, the same as in fiscal 2008. However, \$100 million of the funds provided in fiscal 2008 came with a catch; the amount was conditioned on certification that Egypt was making progress in judicial and police overhauls and closing smuggling tunnels between Egypt and the Gaza Strip.

An amendment in the House to strip the conditions from the fiscal 2008 State-Foreign Operations appropriations bill failed, 74-343.

Despite that overwhelming show of support for the provision, enthusiasm for it on Capitol Hill has fizzled. Military assistance for Egypt in the fiscal 2009 omnibus spending bill contains no such provision.

The United States gives more military aid to Egypt than to any nation in the world except Israel, and the assistance dates back to the 1978 Camp David accords that helped cement an Egyptian-Israeli peace.

Frustrations in Congress over human rights concerns in Egypt led to the conditions in last year's funding. However, the fiscal 2008 legislation granted the Bush administration the authority to waive the conditions, and it did so.

"It was a significant irritant to the bilateral relationship," said one State Department official, referring to the military-aid conditions. The official said the Obama administration, like Bush, opposes them.

“We saw it against the spirit of cooperation [embodied] in the assistance package to Egypt,” said Karim Haggag, press director at the Egyptian Embassy in Washington.

But the Bush waiver irritated congressional critics of Egypt in both parties, who say the country cracks down violently on any challenge to its authority.

“Any administration, Republican or Democrat, Bush or Obama, will certify that the moon is made of green cheese if they can get away with it and get the money,” said Rep. Mark Steven Kirk, R-Ill.